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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE
OSD FOR COMMANDER CHAFFEE
WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: February 05, 2008

Opposition Blasts Government over Chad Mission

¶1. The opposition parties are having a field day with the coalition government over its decision to participate in the EU's EUFOR peacekeeping mission in African Chad and its dispatch of an advance team of 15 soldiers to the country last week, just before a rebel attack on the capital N'Djamena over the weekend. Greens' security spokesperson Peter Pilz has blamed OeVP Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik for promoting Austrian participation in the mission and has called for Austria's immediate withdrawal from it. He also harshly attacked Defense Minister Norbert Darabos (SPOe), claiming that "chaos" prevailed in his Ministry and that Austrian soldiers would play the role of a "football" between French troops stationed in Chad and the rebels.

Like all Austrian media, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung reports that the opposition parties have massively attacked the coalition government over its decision to participate in the EU's peacekeeping mission in Chad and its dispatch of an advance team of 15 soldiers there last week, which came just before a rebel attack on capital N'Djamena over the weekend. Similar to Greens' security spokesperson Peter Pilz, who harshly criticized both the Foreign and Defense Ministers, FPOe leader Heinz-Christian Strache has stressed that developments over the weekend in Chad fully justified his party's rejection of Austrian participation in the mission. He called for both "war ministers" Plassnik and Darabos' resignations. Strache described Darabos' refusal to order the Austrian troops' immediate return home an instance of "depressing stubbornness." Meanwhile, BZÖe chief Peter Westenthaler said that there was no reason for Austrian troops "to spend another hour in Chad. The peacekeeping mission has already failed," and also suggested that France was no longer neutral in the fighting in Chad.

Support for Chancellor on the Decline

¶2. Recent opinion poll results show that SPOe Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer is gradually losing voters' support, as a leading Austrian daily has pointed out. In the latest Gallup poll, 39 percent of Austrians said that they would vote for OeVP Vice-Chancellor and Finance Minister Wilhelm Molterer, and only 30 percent would cast their ballots for Gusenbauer, if there were direct election of the chancellor. In addition, only 32 percent describe Gusenbauer as "likeable," with fewer than 25 percent of women, young people and public-opinion leaders calling him that, says semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung.

EU's Administration Mission to Kosovo

13. The European Union has given the green light to sending a police and civil administration mission to the Serbian province Kosovo. No date has yet been set for deployment, and the EU's Council of Ministers has yet to vote in favor of the move. If passed, the plan envisages sending 1,400 police and 400 EU officials to the province, making it the biggest civilian mission in European Union history. Kosovo is expected to declare independence from Belgrade in the next few weeks, according to a report on ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal.

Austrian Soldiers Remain in Chad

14. All Austrian media continue to report on the situation in Chad, where the advance team for the EU's EUFOR peacekeeping mission of 15 Austrian soldiers was transferred from a hotel in the capital N'Djamena to a military camp near the airport yesterday. Despite massive criticism of the contingent's deployment and calls from the Austrian opposition parties to withdraw the Austrians from the crisis region, the Defense Ministry says the soldiers will remain in Chad for the time being. Speaking on Austrian television yesterday, General Christian Segur-Cabanac from the Defense Ministry emphasized that the advance team was safe for the time being. The contingent would stay in Chad "as long as there is no massive threat to their security," Segur-Cabanac stressed. Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council called on member states to back Chad's government, following days of clashes with rebels in the capital N'Djamena. Thousands of people continue to flee the country, and rebels say they will be launching a fresh assault on the capital. All Austrian media give extensive coverage to the recent developments in Chad. Independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten on its front page reports on a "mass exodus from Chad," adding that Austria "is continuing its mission" nonetheless. In an interview with the daily, Austrian military expert Gerald Karner dismissed the opposition parties' calls for an immediate pullout of the advance team: "All by itself, Austria does not have the means and resources to fly down to the combat zone and evacuating the soldiers." Furthermore, Defense Minister Norbert Darabos' announcement that he would withdraw the Austrian soldiers even without green light from the EU if the situation became critical, "would be a demonstration of lacking solidarity within the EU, politically." Nonetheless, Karner criticized the EUFOR mission as "clearly showing the EU's weakness. It took them months to get the troops and the equipment ready for deployment. Obviously the rebels have used that time and have tried to create new conditions." Meanwhile, in liberal daily Der Standard, Africa expert Antoine Glaser suggests that an Austrian pullout from Chad would jeopardize France's efforts in the country. Such a move "would be a serious blow for Paris. Eric Chevallier, advisor to French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, has been committed for months to putting the EUFOR force together, and he had a really tough time of convincing Poland, Austria and Ireland of deploying small contingents. (...) All his efforts would be in vain," if Austria withdrew from Chad.

US Voters Set for Super Tuesday

15. All Austrian media give prominent coverage to Super Tuesday, where US voters will be holding primaries and caucuses in 24 states for the presidential nomination process. Austrian radio, explaining the selection process for the US presidential election, says the "world's eyes are turned to the US," and points out that the November election "is of key importance not only for America, but for the entire world." The main candidates for the Democratic and Republican parties completed marathon campaigns ahead of Super Tuesday. However, in the Democratic Party, the contest between Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama is very close, which is why Austrian radio suggests it may yet be a while for a Democratic frontrunner to emerge. For the Republicans, on the other hand, Super Tuesday is likely to decide the nomination process in favor of Senator John McCain against his main challenger Mitt Romney. On ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal, commentator Joerg Winter points to the leading candidates' incessant campaigning in the run up to Super Tuesday. Despite Hillary Clinton's huge campaign efforts, Winter says, recent polls saw her rival Barack Obama "constantly gaining ground. In California, (...) Obama has apparently overtaken Clinton shortly before Super Tuesday. In New York and Missouri, too, Obama is on Clinton's heels. Polls can be

wrong, but still everything seems to indicate that neither of the Democratic presidential hopefuls will be able to secure a landslide victory today. The race for the Democratic presidential nomination is likely to continue after Super Tuesday. On the Republican side, however, today could bring about a decision: Senator John McCain is considered the clear frontrunner - he is way ahead in most states. But his competitors are not yet ready to admit defeat."

In centrist daily *Die Presse*, Washington correspondent Norbert Rief publishes portraits of the two parties' leading candidates. For the Democrats, the race is one of "heart versus brain," with Clinton banking on experience, and Obama on his charisma. But whoever wins the race is "certain to go down in history: Since its foundation in 1776, the United States has had neither a female, nor an African American presidential candidate," Rief points out. Among the Republicans, the correspondent writes, "the eternal loser may emerge as the winner." John McCain is seen as the definite frontrunner on Super Tuesday, while his main rival Mitt Romney has been losing votes to Mike Huckabee. Senator McCain "has come a long way since last summer, when people had thought they could already write off his candidacy because he lacked sufficient campaign funds."

Independent provincial daily *Salzburger Nachrichten* publishes an analysis of the US election process, and writes that the Republicans and the Democrats are faced with completely contrary choices: One party will have to agree on the lesser evil, while the other is spoilt for choice. The daily suggests that for the Democrats, the selection of a presidential candidate is a "fundamental decision," and will determine whether it is "back to the golden age or a changing of the guards." The Republicans, meanwhile, will likely choose John McCain, as the "least of all evils," and as "the only potential candidate who stands a chance of defending the White House" for the Grand Old Party.

Kilner